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## The Environmentally Friendly Lifestyle: Simple or Complicated?\*

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**Abstract:** Simplicity is generally considered an important characteristic of the environmentally friendly lifestyle. This article questions this tenet. Nine dimensions of simplicity are proposed: non-ownership, lack of power, aesthetics, behaviour, naturalness, freedom of movement, the sedentary life/faithfulness to a place, education, and living lightly. Using these categories, the question is asked whether the cultural stereotype of simplicity corresponds to reality. The images of the environmentally friendly lifestyles are analysed from an everyday perspective, including radical forms of self-sufficiency. The result is a conclusion contrary to the common belief: while the life of the typical consumerist is simple, the life of environmental virtue is complex. This finding directs attention to one part of N. Elias' sociological theory, which understands the civilisation process as the replacement of simple behaviour with complex rituals.

**Keywords:** environmentally friendly lifestyle, voluntary simplicity, nine dimensions of simplicity, self-sufficiency

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### An alternative, or a post-modern dream?

When we read books advocating ecologically friendly lifestyles or peruse environmental journals, we soon notice that some words recur often. For example, the word 'simple', which is used especially in the expression 'voluntary simplicity', a term coined by Richard B. Gregg, a British disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, in the essay *The Value of Voluntary Simplicity* [1936]. 'Simplicity' is such an important word in the environmental context that authors even place it in the titles of their books,

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such as *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends* by Bill Devall [1988]. *Voluntary Simplicity* is the title of a popular book by Duane Elgin that presents not only the reasoning behind voluntary simplicity and its endorsement but also the results of sociological research on practitioners of voluntary simplicity. Other examples are: *Timeless Simplicity: Creative Living in a Consumer Society*, a book by the British author and painter John Lane published in 2001, and *Epicurean Simplicity*, the poetic inspiration of a simple lifestyle published a year later and written by the American author Stephanie Mills [2002]. Simplicity also makes it into single-issue editions of magazines, such as the 203rd issue of *Resurgence*. The expressions 'voluntary simplicity' and 'simple living' have become the slogans of alternative lifestyle and have entered into the mainstream media and everyday speech. They have come to identify a lifestyle built upon the belief that civilisation has complicated life to an unbearable level. If we live in a simpler manner, we will be happy and will help nature.

Environmental ideologists are wrong, however, if they consider striving for simplicity a result of their ingeniousness and originality. The desire for simplicity ranks among the paradoxes of the contemporary emotional climate. We live in a complex societal structure based on the specialisation of activities and the differentiation of functions. The individual enjoys society's episodic nature, multiple layers of meaning, and non-commitment, while suffering from its chaos. According to Zygmunt Bauman, the yearning for the 'great simplification' is the post-modern version of the ancient melancholy or Romantic ennui. The dream of simplicity is a psychosis, a sickness of the post-modern lifestyle. The desire for simplicity finds fulfilment in sectarian and tribal fashions [Bauman 1994]. If we take Bauman's words a step further, the idea conveyed by environmental movements, that an ecologically beneficial lifestyle is a simple lifestyle, can also be included here.<sup>1</sup> 'Green' proponents of simplicity fail to ask whether this idea conforms to reality, but in their everyday life many of them must experience how very complicated and difficult an environmentally friendly lifestyle is in the 21st century.

What lies behind this deep-seated notion of the complicated consumerist lifestyle and the simplicity of ecological virtues? This stereotypical view is based on a superficial connection that automatically relates the structural and functional complexity of modern society to the everyday life of the individual – the consumer. The image of a good simple life, culturally formed and strengthened throughout the millennia, also plays a role. It currently contains a logical fallacy: The simple life is a good life; the environmentally sensitive life is desirable and good, and therefore, it must be simple.

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<sup>1</sup> Those opposed to an environmentally oriented lifestyle also link its proponents to simplicity but in its negative connotation: 'those greens are simpletons, primitives'.

### Nine dimensions of good simplicity (1–9)

A look at history shows that the desire for simplicity and equating simplicity with the good life has been a constant in many traditions of thought. It is a remarkable reaction to the prevailing tendency of the human – and probably also the natural – world to grow in complexity and diversity.<sup>2</sup> In Europe, efforts to make life more free grew out of the stoical and cynical views of life and were further developed by Christian tradition [Lohse 1969].

A long social and cultural history packed the word ‘simplicity’ with so many connotations that it is now impossible to formulate a single definition of this phenomenon. It may be useful to replace the definition with a reflection on several meanings and characteristics that have been accentuated to varying degrees at different times and in diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, I suggest considering the nine dimensions of simplicity – though they can sometimes overlap or be combined with each other.<sup>3</sup>

Simplicity mainly tends to be understood as *non-ownership* (1).<sup>4</sup> Things must be placed or installed, tested, secured, looked after, repaired, stored and ultimately liquidated. One who is unburdened by the need to care for things receives the reward of free time. ‘The number of possibilities – goods, services, events – has exploded in affluent societies, but the day in its conservative way continues to be just 24 hours long. Scarcity of time is the nemesis of affluence’<sup>5</sup>, says the critic of consumerist life, Wolfgang Sachs [1999: 15]. Folklore says: ‘Happy is the one who owns nothing...’; and on a classical note:

Why with rich gate and pilar’d range  
Upbuild new mansions, twice as high,  
Or why my Sabine vale exchange  
For more laborious luxury  
– Horatius<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Evolutionary theory speaks about increasing complexity. The desire for simplicity also contrasts strangely with the idea of increasing complexity, which, according to Norbert Elias, forms the basis of civilisation [Elias 2000]. I will return to this at the end of the article.

<sup>3</sup> Duane Elgin also writes about various dimensions of simplicity in an article entitled ‘The Garden of Simplicity’. The key difference between his and my understanding lies in the fact that Elgin does not question whether the environmentally friendly lifestyle is a simple one but rather underscores the connection between simplicity and environmental friendliness.

<sup>4</sup> Elgin writes about ‘uncluttered simplicity’ [Elgin 2003].

<sup>5</sup> Nemesis is a Greek goddess who, according to people’s deeds, dispenses happiness or punishes pompousness.

<sup>6</sup> Translated by John Conington.

Certainly, it is not just a practical advantage for the poor. A person who lives simply is liberated from menial worries and receives the reward of freedom. Accumulating things takes away a person's freedom and is constraining. Not to own, means to maintain a clean and good heart. Such is the simplicity that Diogenes of Laerta relates to innocence in his story about Diogenes of Sinopa: 'On one occasion he saw a child drinking out of his hands, and so Diogenes threw away the cup which belonged to his wallet, saying: "That child has beaten me in simplicity."' <sup>7</sup> In More's Utopia, private ownership is abolished because it necessarily corrupts. Each individual receives one tunic for two years.

A person truly lives simply, freely and happily if he or she is capable of relinquishing not only things but also *power* (2). Whoever has power or takes part in it becomes entangled in complicated relationships and intrigues and is constrained by suspicious reciprocity and moral compromises.

In a vulgar way, we can see the connection between the non-ownership and powerlessness of the poor and the consolation in happiness that they believe their state brings them. When seen through the lens of secular idealism this connection expresses the eternal human yearning for justice. These aspects of simplicity come to us especially through Christ's teachings. They were the cornerstone of the practices of the early Church and were held up as the ideal throughout Christian tradition. The happy existence of the simpleton Francis of Assisi, who refused to become the head of his order, is legendary. The effort to get free from assets and avoid positions of power gave impetus to the rise of the simple democratised worship practised within the blank-walled Protestant houses of prayer.

Attempts at a life resistant to the temptations of assets and power are, like other dimensions of simplicity, based on transcultural values. In *Timeless Simplicity* John Lane [2001] stresses the inspiration that the contemporary understanding of simplicity draws from the teachings and the practices of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Taoism.

Another visible dimension of good simplicity is its *aesthetic aspect* (3): <sup>8</sup> simple but elegant. Functionalist architects of the 1930s and 1940s linked the aesthetic of simplicity to social good and justice. Many of them aspired to a sociological and philosophical approach. Czech avant-garde architects, whose work carries undeniable traces of social utopianism, conceptualised 'reasonable consumption' and named it 'necessism'. 'Reasonable consumption' would come, according to Karel Honzík [1946], when the wasteful capitalist system is replaced with a planned socialist economy. It can even generally be said that social utopias stressed this aspect of simplicity. Thomas More, Etienne Cabet and William Morris pondered the aesthetic aspects of everyday life.

A reading of the history of the applied arts reveals a surprising number of waves of simplification in attire, furnishings, and decorative porcelain, and

<sup>7</sup> Translated by C. D. Yonge.

<sup>8</sup> Elgin's concept [2003] of 'elegant simplicity' is similar to this dimension.

demonstrates how simplified fashion reflected the values of society and corresponded to the dissemination of new ideas about a better, simpler life. One well-known fashion revolution occurred in France in the 1780s and 1790s. Classically inspired women's fashion, such as the simple tunic called a *chemise*, replaced the complicated Rococo dress with the hoop and rigid bodice. Jacques-Louis David designed a simple dress as the national costume of the French Revolution in 1793. Equally symbolic is the contrast between the simple Empire hairdo and the absurd overdone hairdos at that time typical of a rotten monarchy. Also notice the elaborate attire of negative fairytale characters: the evil daughters are vainly attired, while the good sister wears simple clothes, and yet is more beautiful.

Dark fairytale characters who wear fancy clothes also *behave* (4) in an unnatural and elaborate manner. Positive heroes are free, often because they do not yield to the complicated rituals and rules of society. Rather than conforming or putting on airs, they act spontaneously and simply – or in other words, naturally.<sup>9</sup>

The misologists present a clear example of simplicity opposing *education* (5).<sup>10</sup> The Christian view of the world has from its inception contained an element that rejects the wisdom of antiquity and worldly knowledge, which is hard to reconcile with goodness. Or as Luke writes in his epistle: 'My Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I am grateful that you hid all this from wise and educated people and showed it to ordinary people.' (Luke 10: 21)<sup>11</sup> The goal is to have a simple spirit, a clean soul unburdened with the weight of knowledge. Tertullian, one of the oldest Church fathers, speaks to the soul: 'But I call thee not as when, fashioned in schools, trained in libraries, fed in Attic academies and porticoes, thou belchest wisdom. I address thee simple, rude, uncultured and untaught.... I want thine inexperience, since in thy small experience no one feels any confidence.'<sup>12</sup> The fact that the misologists were not unusual in their view of education, but rather that they expressed a certain human inclination, is supported by the sympathy many generations have felt for the good simpleton Silly Billy.

The most noticeable characteristic of simplicity in contemporary ecological ideology is its connection to naturalness, to the principle that it is *close to nature* (6).<sup>13</sup> The Romantics of various times and many cultures seemed to discover the ideal of simplicity precisely in nature. The simplicity of nature, and the freedom in which its inhabitants live, contrast sharply with the falseness of our society and our rotten civilisation, which constrain human freedom. Apparently,

<sup>9</sup> This notion also contradicts Norbert Elias' civilisation theory.

<sup>10</sup> 'Misologist' means 'enemy of the muses', i.e. of the arts and sciences, and especially one who opposes higher education; one who hates or dislikes reasoning or argument; a hater of knowledge and enlightenment.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from the Contemporary English Version (CEV) of the Bible.

<sup>12</sup> Translated by Rev. S. Thelwall.

<sup>13</sup> Elgin calls it 'natural simplicity' [2003].

even in nature simplicity is linked to goodness.<sup>14</sup> One is good if one lives in harmony with nature, or at least in the vicinity of nature.

Hermits, regardless of type or origin, are an extreme example of seeking the good life by fleeing to the simplicity in nature. The phenomenon started with the ancient Egyptian hermits, who lived with the animals in the desert, and also included Chinese landscape artists – painters and poets. And it has continued right up to the loners of the 20th and 21st centuries attempting to live an alternative, purely ‘environmental’ lifestyle.

Two models of admiration for the natural evolved, which express contradictory views of simplicity and of humanity itself. The models differ in their assessment of the proper modes of making a living and of relationship to place and to external stimuli:

The principle of simple *freedom* (7) is embodied in the figures of Native Americans, pilgrims, wanderers, hobos, and Gypsies. They roam the landscape ‘free as birds’ because they are not tied to one place or to a way of earning a living or tied down by things, power or responsibilities, or by the always-complicated relationships with others. The cultural stereotype of a proud Native American, living freely in nature, had a strong influence on the nascent American environmental ethics movement. Henry David Thoreau wrote: ‘The very simplicity and nakedness of man’s life in the primitive ages imply this advantage, at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep, he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountaintops. But lo! Men have become the tool of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper.’ [Thoreau 1980: 30]

Another model of good simplicity classifies that which is natural in a completely different way: travel complicates life; it floods a person with too many outside impulses, which he or she is not capable of internalising. The simple *sedentary way of life* (8) guards against the overwhelming forces of outside stimuli. Unlike the wanderer, the settled agriculturist lives happily with the regular diurnal rhythms and the changes of season, sheltered from surprises and sudden changes. Those who point out the negative aspects of the contemporary travel dynamic may be surprised to learn that criticism of travel is ancient and widespread among European and world thinkers.<sup>15</sup> Seneca’s opinion is well known:

<sup>14</sup> This is a view of Rousseauian Romanticism. Other Romantics, such as Alfred de Vigny or the Czech poet Karel Hynek Mácha, saw nature as a heartless power indifferent to human fate. Their intuition led them to conclusions similar to those in Anne Dillard’s biological studies, which will be discussed below.

<sup>15</sup> It would be interesting to find out how the attitude towards travelling developed in American culture, with its Native American tradition. Perhaps the ethic of freedom and mobility plays a more defining role in US culture than in Europe.



Though you may cross vast spaces of sea, and though, as our Virgil  
remarks  
Lands and cities are left astern, your faults will follow you whithersoever  
you travel.<sup>16</sup>

The same thought is reflected in an old French proverb:

The wolf went to Rome, left there his fur but none of his habits.<sup>17</sup>

Connecting simplicity with ease of living, with an uncomplicated everyday existence, *living lightly* (9) is an important aspect of our deliberations about an environmentally friendly lifestyle. This concept is related to ancient ideas conveyed in paintings by old masters that life during the Golden Age was simple and happy. It was so mainly because humans were not pained by unfulfillable desires, and all needs were fulfilled. In the Garden of Eden, as we know it, for example, from cultural images of the Arcadian landscape [Librová 1988], humans lived in an everlasting summer, naked, in harmony with their senses, and at peace with wild animals. Adam did not need to toil to secure his well-being. The cool water and shade of evergreen trees tempered the mid-day heat, a cave or an overhang offered a welcoming shelter for sleeping. In the garden, living simply meant living without the complications that crop failures, illness, and natural disasters cause humans. Instead, humans enjoyed the natural bounty. The Bible states: 'The Lord God made all sorts of trees grow up from the ground – trees that were beautiful and that produced delicious fruit.' (Genesis 2: 9)<sup>18</sup> Most importantly, the idea of living lightly means living free from the painful need to decide: *Qual der Wahl*, 'suffering from choice', as Georg Simmel [1983: 132] reminds us, is the fate of the modern individual faced with a great many choices.

The next section inquires into the extent which cultural stereotypes of simplicity correspond to reality.

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<sup>16</sup> Translated by Richard Gummere.

<sup>17</sup> Morawski [1925]; from the original French, *Le loup alla à Rome, et y laissa de son poil, mais rien de ses coutumes*, translated by Bohdana Librová and Renata and Benjamin Vail.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from the CEV.



### Complicated environmental virtues and the simple consumerist life<sup>19</sup>

Is what the slogans tell us true, that an environmentally friendly life is simple, while a consumerist existence is complicated? Let us consider this in the light of the above nine dimensions.

Our contemporary ideology of voluntary simplicity explicitly or implicitly suggests that the source of environmental problems is the ownership of things. Caricatures in *The Ecologist* magazine depict consumers partly as vultures and partly as miserable creatures imprisoned under piles of stuff in their overflowing flats. Photographs in *Resurgence* magazine show that the abode of the environmentally virtuous resembles a monastery cell.

When I visited people in households living out voluntary modesty during my sociological research<sup>20</sup> [Librová 1999], I noticed that they liked surrounding themselves with things. It is worth noting that American researchers have referred to people with an environmentally friendly lifestyle as 'typically eclectic decorators', despite the fact that elsewhere the same lifestyle is described as 'simple' [Ray and Anderson 2000: 36]. What kinds of things? Most importantly, they were usually not purchased. There were gifts or inherited and found objects. Purchased items had usually been bought second (or third) hand. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in the individuals' propensity to create personal relationships coupled with a faithfulness to things and an inability to get rid of them. I have heard comments such as 'this teddy bear was given to me by my great grandmother for my fourth birthday', 'this scythe cannot hammer, but my uncle still used it', 'a friend of mine gave me this collection of boxes prior to emigrating', and 'we found this jaybird feather in the Tatra Mountains'.

Proponents of necessism would be appalled by these households. On the other hand, Mary Douglas, Baron Isherwood [1979] and Helga Dittmar [1992] would find support there for their theories inquiring into the deeper symbolic meaning of things for individuals, society and culture. Erich Fromm would also be pleased, and he would consider this complex relational way of owning things to be an expression of the To Be mode, not the To Have mode [Fromm 1976].

<sup>19</sup> This text focuses on the lifestyle choices of households. However, the professional lifestyle also has serious consequences in contemporary life. One who claims that the complexity of work has increased substantially in the last decades is too focused on intellectuals, researchers and managers. In fact, much work has become very simple due to extreme division of labour, mechanisation, automatisisation and electronisation. These processes also take away the possibility of decision-making, deprive workers of context in their work, and remove worker responsibility including environmental responsibility. Telephone operators filling in databases clearly exemplify this trend, as do the cashiers in supermarkets.

<sup>20</sup> A longitudinal study was conducted in 1992 and 2002 using the same set of respondents. Qualitative research was based on 47 households with low consumption, which was not necessitated by low income. For more information about the study see Librová [1999].

The rejection of power is another aspect of the environmentally friendly lifestyle. Members of the environmental movement in the Czech Republic promote simple, direct democracy and have until recently refused to participate in political power in its complex parliamentary form. This aversion started to weaken as it became generally accepted that sharing in power can be a means to effectively influence how society behaves towards nature. To refer to the respondents in my voluntary modesty study again, many of them are members of local government, and some of them had been elected the mayor of their village.

We said that plain dress and behaviour, along with poverty and powerlessness, are part of the archetype of simplicity. The shunning of social rituals so characteristic of the alternative movements in the 1960s and 1970s is apparently nonexistent in the contemporary environmentally friendly lifestyle movement. German and Austrian journalists like to point out, with a touch of malice, that when rebels dressed in sweaters became the established Green Party politicians they had their perfect-fitting clothes tailored in the same salons as those of their parliamentary colleagues. The norms of social activists are slowly becoming less casual and are shedding their disdain for complicated manners.

How is it with the fifth dimension of simplicity – the low esteem for higher education? I found that the children of people who live in voluntary modesty are studying [Librová 1994, 1999, 2003]. The environmental ideology of a return to the primitive, pre-civilisation stages of society is gradually being eroded. Texts about voluntary simplicity from the 1970s, warning against overly intellectual approaches, have become rare. Complaints levelled by university students in the past, demanding to know ‘Why are you forcing the theories of Spinoza and Lamarck on us? I wanted to learn the specific things we need to do for nature!’, have disappeared.

It is generally accepted that the environmentally friendly life is impossible without education. It is based on a sensitivity for nature that develops through direct sensory experience, but also on information and deeper, rational reasoning. The environmentally friendly life requires an individual to have basic knowledge of biology and ecology and information about biophilic technologies. It cannot be achieved without a basic understanding of the historical and social contexts of the human relationship with nature. From a sociological point of view, this rethought approach can be seen as a part of reflexive modernity [Beck 1993].

In contrast to our hunting and agricultural ancestors, who made decisions intuitively and based on tradition in a world of the same ontic state, today powerful, unnatural technologies have been offered to or forced upon us that require informed use or reasoned refusal. Grandfather’s advice is useless to a farmer contemplating a canister of herbicide.

The idea that one needs a simple intuitive approach to live unburdened by education is slowly disappearing. However, the following dimension of simplicity is considered a requirement for environmental friendliness: it is necessary to live in proximity to and in solidarity with nature. Duane Elgin writes: ‘A natural

simplicity means to remember our deep roots in the natural world.' [Elgin 2003: 4] Life in the city seems like an impenetrable, complex thicket of frustrating complications, and consumerism is understood as a product of our alienation from nature. Radical followers of the environmentally friendly life yearn to become one with simple and good nature and to give themselves over to her radiance and learn from her laws.

However, knowledge of the biological sciences has complicated our Arcadian and Rousseauian view of nature as the Teacher of simplicity. The more scientists uncover about the workings of nature, the more they marvel at its complexity, and many speak humbly of the impossibility of knowing her fully. Nature, just like humans and human cultures, tends towards diversity. Humans attempting to reduce diversity and attain simplicity are thus not mimicking nature but rather acting in contradiction to natural processes. Adolf Portmann [1964] showed the complex aesthetics of nature and pointed out that its luxurious, elaborate structures cannot be explained as a function of simple survival and the narrowly understood expediency of survival.

Can nature function as our model for moral behaviour? Can it be an inspiration for environmental ethics? When we look carefully, we are amazed by her beauty, but we search in vain for expressions of compassion and love towards the weak, expressions that would be worth reciprocating. If we give credence to the widely accepted theory of the selfish gene [Dawkins 1989], we find the search for morality in nature absurd. Even environmental ethicists remain unconvinced of a morality in nature and most often understand nature as morally indifferent. While Annie Dillard [1998], an astute observer, does not base her reasoning on the selfish gene theory, natural laws disgust her morally and aesthetically. She is afraid of the evil that governs nature through its food chains based on creatures eating one another. 'Precisely: we are moral creatures, then, in an amoral world... World is fixed and blind, robot programmed to kill.' [Dillard 1998: 179]. Thus, a straightforward effort to protect nature as our good mother and become more frugal on her behalf must come to terms with the well-argued statement 'either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak' [Ibid]. Unless we wish to use this dilemma to cynically justify our destructive lifestyle, we are forced again to rethink our complex relationship to nature, while taking into account Annie Dillard's point that we are not like nature.

The dimension of simplicity that relates to free movement is environmentally relevant. Travel is a defining aspect of the late modern era. It is no coincidence that Zygmunt Bauman's famous studies about post-modernism and globalisation focus on travel [Bauman 1994, 1998]. It is based on a richness of stimuli and choices and gives us feelings of freedom and independence. Still, travel is one of the most serious environmentally destructive behaviours of our contemporary lifestyle.

When thinking about simplicity and complexity we must distinguish between travel as a means of getting from one place to another, and the principle of travel:

When we consider the principle of travel, in contrast to other dimensions of simplicity, the environmental slogans hold true: to live environmentally is to simplify one's life and to reduce the stimuli that overwhelm us. That means travelling less or not travelling at all. The contemporary man's desire for travel, however, is so great that even environmental activists are devout travellers, even though they otherwise highlight the simple virtues of their farming ancestors and are well aware of the environmental risks associated with travel. Even these critics of contemporary civilisation are restless and seek a change of scene. Even they accept this typical aspect of late modern society, and desire the 'possibility of choice' and the 'diversity of stimuli'.

When the 'un-environmental' globe-trotting of environmentalists is criticised, they defend themselves by pointing to their *means* of travel: they walk with a tent on their back, take a train, or hitchhike, and thus leave only a small environmental footprint. Viewed from the perspective of simplicity, however, the simple thing to do is to get on a plane and let the travel agency take you to that comfortable resort on the other side of the planet. So the same is true for travel as for other dimensions of simplicity: the environmentally friendly form of travel is more complicated than the means of travel used by mainstream consumers.

So-called alternative tourism, considered an environmentally friendly approach, also carries risks, as it often leads visitors to unfrequented areas. The discoverers of hidden natural beauties bring back photographs and inspire their friends, other travellers and travel agencies to make similar trips. Practically all expansion of tourism begins as the harmless travel of excited private voyagers. Travel as practiced by American transcendentalists and other nature lovers was inspired by Native Americans, but it has since become a grave danger for nature.

We are not talking just about leisure travel. Environmental activities also exist in academic form and are becoming more and more professionalised. Environmentalists 'simply' get on the plane and side by side with industrialists and bank managers travel to conferences, seminars and workshops thousands of kilometres away, even though they are already connected electronically to the whole world. The expectation that Internet conferences for scientists and politicians would decrease the number of airline and automobile passengers turned out to be naive. The opposite is true: people tend to desire to see in person that which they have come to know through the electronic media.

The greatest mistake in equating the environmentally friendly lifestyle with simplicity is the conviction that such a lifestyle is easily led every day. Books and magazines on alternative culture are filled with the concept of 'living lightly'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The expression 'lightly' is used here in a different way than in the slogan 'tread lightly on the Earth'. Many authors use this slogan to encourage their readers to leave a small and light ecological footprint. 'Also Mahatma Gandhi saw clearly that man must tread lightly on the Earth.' [Jacob 2003]

The word 'lightly' will be familiar to readers of Bill McKibben's famous book *Hope, Human and Wild: True Stories of Living Lightly on the Earth* [1995]. The expression 'living lightly' also figures in the title of a monograph dealing with radical ways of living in communes [Schwarz and Schwarz 1998].

Proponents of the 'living lightly' concept argue that the consumer's life is difficult because he or she must constantly make decisions. The consumer is a slave to never-ending pseudo-needs. The consumer strives for greater work productivity and higher financial rewards, obsessively studies product catalogues, drives between supermarkets, and makes Herculean efforts to get through the maze of advantageous offers and loans. All this clutters the mind, takes time, and complicates life. It is necessary to simplify one's life to make life easier.

Such is the depiction of the good simple life given to us by Thoreau: 'For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labour of my hands, and I found that, by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study.' [Thoreau 1980: 51–52] He adds: 'In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but pastime, if we will live simply and wisely....' [Thoreau 1980: 53]

Does Thoreau's view correspond to reality?<sup>22</sup> Is it really true that the everyday lives of consumption-oriented individuals are complicated? I argue that it is rather the opposite: if anything is easy these days, it is the life of the consumerists. Anthony Giddens suggests much the same, albeit from a different perspective and with a positive evaluation. He depicts with great plasticity how the abstract systems of modern society give individuals a feeling of assurance and security. They allow individuals to carry out activities that in the past were impossible or entailed great effort and uncertainty. In order to travel by plane from London to Los Angeles one only needs to complete a few administrative tasks. Simply pushing a button or turning on the faucet is enough to light up a house and draw water [Giddens 1990: 112–113].<sup>23</sup>

Entire branches of industry work on simplifying our everyday existence. We buy products that with great effort people used to make at home. Instead of mending and altering clothes and repairing broken objects we simply buy new ones. Household chores have been made easy by a host of gadgets. For example, handling food, organising household food supplies and cooking have been made

<sup>22</sup> When reading Thoreau we must not forget that this early radical ideologist advocating the environmentally friendly lifestyle writes about an experiment that constituted a brief interlude in his bachelor life as an intellectual, an author, and an expert in ancient Greek culture. Even if we accept Thoreau's experience from the 19th century, the technological and civilisational changes since his time have rendered our situation quite different. As we shall see, a thoroughly self-sufficient man can feed himself, or in fact survive, only through great effort and by overcoming unimaginable complications in life and work.

<sup>23</sup> Giddens acknowledges a notion that is key for the environmental perspective: these common everyday activities of individuals lead to many unintentional side effects.

easy with appliances like the energy-demanding freezer, microwave and deep fryer.

Home cooking has rapidly decreased because it is complicated. Grocery stores are filled with pre-prepared food and meals. When shopping, I rarely see anyone buying flour or yeast. Even in the countryside people have stopped bothering to cook their own meals in order to make their lives easier. They buy cases of drinks made of chemical concentrates, imported from the other side of the globe, while the currants and apples in their own gardens go to waste.

Plastics that damage nature simplify our lives by providing us with single-use containers, packaging and other things. The blessings of hygiene specialists have helped make the packaging industry a lucrative business. No one even thinks of getting milk with their own milk jug. It is already too demanding to carry glass bottles. What can be easier than emptying a can, a plastic bottle or a carton of juice, and tossing it, hopefully, into a dustbin? Read a chapter in any consumer's guide to effective environmental choices and you will find that environmental virtue adds minor or major complications to your life rather than simplifying it. Has any proponent of voluntary simplicity tried to travel with small children and luggage to a remote place using public transport? Only people with a feeling for special situations and a sense of humour can find pleasure in such complicated and erratic transport [Librová 2003: 218].

Sociologists often stress the need to select from countless choices as one of the key characteristics of the modern world. Yet, in the context of everyday living, even this need is simplified in late modern society thanks to the help of fashion and advertising.

### **The simplicity/complexity of self-sufficient food cultivation**

Food self-sufficiency is considered a key environmental virtue. Among serious environmentalists, the most honest consider growing their own food either as farmers or as members of farming communes. Prior to embracing that choice, however, some serious questions need to be answered, most importantly: where did this idea of farming way of life come from?

It is possible that the cultural stereotype depicting agriculture as easy and joyful, a view further strengthened by environmental ideology, prevents some from seeing the difficulty of such endeavours. We say we know about how hard the farmer works, and some of us can even vaguely imagine it based on experience cultivating our garden plots. Still, we tend to forget the hard work and let the idyllic image of the peasant dominate our minds.

An idealist is very likely to underestimate the economic aspect of the matter, which is nevertheless a key and at times fatal determinant of whether farming can support the farmer and his family. Food self-sufficiency is ecologically the optimal mode of food economy, but it is practically unattainable for the solitary



farmer and remains just an ideal. The contemporary professional organic farmer is a part of the monetary system and specialises in certain agricultural products. Even in the past, peasant families relied on cooperation with neighbours and others in the village. Households exchanged many products. Neighbourly reciprocity allowed for the consumption of meat over a longer period in times of limited storage and conservation potential. Today, such practices are almost impossible in villages mainly because few people farm.

Social conditions also thwart efforts to farm. Who today has a large family to help on the farm, and who is willing to force a son to marry a woman that would make a good farmer's wife? Farming attempts by alternative lifestyle immigrants are usually seen as a foreign element in villages and lack support from neighbours.

The environmentally conscious farmer will also encounter other obstacles, such as his or her environmental ethics. Farmers in an earlier age, who should serve as a role model, could not afford to complicate their lives with such ethics. I can imagine how love of nature and landscape, empathy towards animals and vegetarianism can from economic and existential perspectives cause serious problems for the modern farmer.

The desire for self-sufficiency using traditional farming technologies runs up against yet another set of problems. The knowledge base of craftspeople, who made traditional products adapted to local conditions and customs, has been heavily eroded. Blacksmiths, wheelmakers, coopers, kegmakers, and axmakers disappeared from the countryside more than half a century ago. A person trying to farm in the old ways and drawing inspiration from the simplicity of the peasants of old winds up in a situation even more difficult than the one the model farmer of old encountered.

When the legendary American farmer and essayist Wendell Berry writes 'I think that good farming is a high and difficult art' [1995: ix], he is not speaking of the mechanised and chemical-based simplicity of contemporary wage-workers in a specialised agricultural business. He is also not referring to the ability of the peasants of old to intuitively manage the complex variability of their work. Berry, originally a university professor of English, is a modern farmer and author. His words speak to the ideal farmer of our times, the universal ecological farmer, who consciously closes energy and material loops. His farming is not based solely on old traditions and family experience, but is rather rooted in professional and overall education, an ethical culture, and ecological sensibility and reflection.

Radical do-it-yourself food growers can easily spend all their time and energy digging, building, farming and cooking. The quality of life assured in 'how-to' texts in environmental magazines cannot be maintained. Such a life can also have dire consequences for environmental friendliness, the original goal. Eager self-sufficient farmers, especially if they doggedly refuse to use any technology, may lose their playfulness, their appreciation of people, books and thought, for beauty and the surrounding world. If they set conditions too hard to meet, they



may even end up losing interest in nature and its protection. Wendel Berry is no such overworked self-sufficient type. He sets aside enough energy and time to enjoy nature, to think and to write.

Is not the modest city dweller, who buys vegetables at the farmers' market or from an environmentally friendly farmer, and has time to think through the consequences of his or her decisions and act accordingly, perhaps living a more environmentally friendly life? *Green Living in the Urban Jungle* [Siegle 2001] is an interesting educational publication that presents specific activities of environmentally friendly living in cities.

### Conclusions and further questions

Besides attempts to attenuate environmental damage with technology, there are efforts under way to transform contemporary lifestyles, in particular by changing consumption patterns and in a more radical way decreasing consumption. Environmental ideology characterises these processes without deeper reflection as simplifying a complex lifestyle in a modern society. It thus perpetuates the ancient cultural stereotype of good simplicity.

This work asked whether such a characteristic reflects contemporary social reality. The analysis was grounded in nine semantic dimensions of simplicity: non-ownership, lack of power, aesthetics, behaviour, naturalness, freedom of movement, the sedentary life/attachment to a place, and living lightly. The results of the analysis showed that reality does not conform to environmental ideology. The environmentally friendly lifestyle is in many respects not simple but rather more complex than the everyday lifestyle of the majority in modern society. The conclusion leads to hypotheses indicating possible future research on the environmental context of lifestyles. The environmentally friendly lifestyle can be understood as a part of the civilisation process as proposed by Norbert Elias;<sup>24</sup> in other words, as a societal process, in which simple forms of behaviour are gradually replaced with complex rituals.

It is interesting that another author, C. Schmidt [1993: 33–46], also interprets the environmentally friendly lifestyle in the spirit of Elias' thought, although he draws on a different aspect of Elias' theory. Schmidt believes that environmentally friendly changes in lifestyles can be understood as an expression of growing social pressure on self-control, which according to Elias is an important indicator of civilisation. Finally, the Eliasian interpretation is further supported, accord-

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<sup>24</sup> N. Elias certainly does not have in mind the environmental context, but he does touch upon the topic of animal ethics. He shows the changes in human sensitivity to animals with images of cruel animal executions during Midsummer celebrations and by documenting the historical development of ways of serving meat. In this context he uses the term 'threshold of repugnance', which may transfer well into the areas of environmental ethics and the environmentally friendly lifestyle [Elias 2000].

ing to Schmidt, by the fact that sensitivity to environmental issues, as expressed in environmental ethics, movements and lifestyle changes, is strongly linked to social status.

That brings us to the next question related to lifestyle attempts to solve environmental problems: the question of *dissemination*. C. Schmidt, in reference to Elias, states that sensitivity to status and the ensuing trickle-down effect constitute hope for the future. Recent sociological theories, however, suggest that status motivations for lifestyle choices have been weakening [Lipovetsky 2006; Maffesoli 1997]. Lifestyle is becoming less and less influenced by social prestige and imitation, which are increasingly being replaced by feelings of satisfaction and bliss. Thus the chances of disseminating a given lifestyle by means of imitation should decrease.

We arrive at the final questions of whether and how the environmentally friendly lifestyle, which is relatively complex, can be disseminated in an individualistic society. How does an individual oriented towards personal satisfaction face complex life? The answer is not unequivocal. It will depend on the subject of the individual's hedonistic orientation<sup>25</sup> and on the dimension of simplicity/complexity discussed in this article.

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<sup>25</sup> It is a mistake to confound hedonism with consumerism, stemming from failure to understand the historical root of the term. Hedonism, close to Epicurean ideas, stresses that bliss does not refer to the 'pleasures of debauchery' but rather to the state in which one feels no pain in the body and no anxiety in the soul. Consumerism is ignorant of Hedonism's basic value, which is poise and peace.

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## Urban Transformation From Public and Private Space to Spaces of Hybrid Character

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**Abstract:** The main characteristics of public space are accessibility and usability for all citizens. However, current developments, primarily observed in cities, suggest the loss of a clear distinction between public and private space. Instead, urban spaces of hybrid character are emerging. Spaces with public functions, like train stations, parks or pedestrian areas, are changing in character, and semi-private spaces, like malls or plazas, are spreading. In order to get a realistic view of developments this article offers a critical appraisal of recent privatisation trends followed by a brief summary. After discussing feasible reasons for the loss of private space the article considers potential implications for the future of citizenship.

**Keywords:** public space, privatisation, social control, security, urban studies  
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### Introduction

Public space is – most of all – urban space. Indeed, although the sheer notion of public space refers to an open sociological category, not spatially determined, it is hard to find any definition of the term that is not related to the city [Madanipour 1999; Carmona et al. 2003]. Beginning with the market place of mediaeval times, the public space developed in the city [see, e.g., Weber 1978; Bahrtdt 1974; Habermas 1991]. The characteristics of public space – to be specified in juridical, functional, normative, social, and symbolic dimensions – are mainly assigned to *urban* public space [Siebel and Wehrheim 2003]. Public streets, public buildings and parks, the postulated common accessibility of public areas, the 'blasé attitude' and 'reserve' of metropolitans, first described by Georg Simmel,<sup>1</sup> the structural symbols of consumption – all these elements take shape in the city and exert their influence on urban life and on the city's appearance.

Although it is possible to find general definitions that refer to public spaces as physical spaces that are open to all, I shall concentrate on the urban public space as the public space, for reasons of quality as well as quantity: For some time now, scientific reflections on the form and function of the public urban space have

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<sup>1</sup> See 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' in Simmel [1971].